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## No. VIII.

# THE BRITISH NAVY IN THE WORLD-WAR

BY

J. CASTELL HOPKINS, F.S.S., F.R.G.S.

Author of *The Canadian Annual Review*, 1901-18

In the World-War of 1914-18 the British Navy was an almost invisible element to the ordinary landsman of our British countries. He never saw the ships, he heard little of these great structures of steel and iron as they lay upon the deep or guarded convoys or fought submarines. He only faintly realized their work as they watched the sweeping seas with continuous and almost microscopic care for any appearance of the great German fleet which lay in hiding behind the guns and mines and submarines of the impregnable fortifications of Heligoland; as they carried on the vast network of blockade against German ports and shipping, German trade and transport of men, German import of munitions or food, German development of plots and propaganda by travelling spies and agents; as they triumphed in occasional encounters with a skulking enemy—at the Falklands, in the Bight of Heligoland, at the Battle of Jutland, or in the heroic fight of Zeebruggé. When the War began the Fleets of Great Britain and Germany were as follows:—

GREAT BRITAIN.		GERMANY.	
Super-Dreadnought type.....	14	Dreadnought type .....	13
Dreadnought type .....	18	(Under completion) .....	3
Pre-Dreadnought type (1895-1908) .....	38	Pre-Dreadnought type (1891-1908) .....	22
Super-Dreadnoughts completing .....	3	Old types (1889-1893) .....	8
Total .....	73	Total .....	46
Armoured cruisers (1901-1908) .....	34	Armoured cruisers (1892-1913) .....	40
Cruisers (1890-1914) .....	87	Cruisers (1893-1910) .....	12
Destroyers (1893-1914) .....	227	Destroyers (1889-1913) .....	152
Torpedo-boats (1885-1908) ..	109	Torpedo-boats (1887-1898) ..	45
Submarines (1904-1913) .....	75	Submarines .....	40

The danger facing Great Britain and our Empire was not in superiority of naval power or in any pitched battle; it lay in a possible surprise, in the strategy of constant German raids, in the forced personal inaction of the sailor so far as battle was concerned, in a continuous life of strained expectation and preparation which day after day, for passing months

and years, could never be relaxed for a moment, in the development of submarine warfare and the final, unscrupulous, use of that war machine along lines never dreamed of as possible between civilized nations. The German Navy, also, lived in safe retirement while the merchant vessels of its nation were swept from the seas, but it strove day and night to get even one of its cruisers through the British cordon. Such a ship as the *Emden* did immense damage to the merchant shipping of the Allies; what would not have happened if dozens of such cruisers had got past the British warders.

The Royal Navy had to guard against this and with two or three exceptions did so in full measure; it had to bottle up the second greatest Navy in the world and it did so with brilliant success—at Jutland defeating the one serious and sustained effort to break through; it had to tie up German merchant ships and trade and did so in splendid style; it had to hold up or overcome the Submarine and eventually did so in a degree surpassing hope and wonderful in its details of scientific effort, clever strategy, continuous exertion and brilliant initiative; it had to make the seas safe for commerce and during the four years of war did make it possible for the British Empire to carry on a trade of forty thousand million dollars (\$40,000,000,000); it had to provide instant safety on and after August 4th, 1914, for the transfer to France of that gallant little Army which stemmed the hordes of German soldiers at Mons and helped to hold the left of the French forces which won the first Battle of the Marne and saved Paris and the coasts of France; it actually established and held, during four and a half years of bitter warfare, a lane of safe passage for the transfer from England to France of millions of men and billions of tons of supplies and munitions.

Yet the situation to the British Navy and to its sailors or merchant seamen was at first untried and unknown. No great Naval battle had been fought since Trafalgar a hundred years before; conditions of Naval warfare had changed absolutely from the old wooden walls of Nelson, the unrifled guns, or the cutlass-armed sailors or boarders of previous struggles at sea; great floating structures of iron and steel now swept the stormy waters with ease and wonderful speed; cannon of vast size could fire immense shells for twenty miles with accurate aim and power in a single broadside from one battleship sufficient to have wrecked the whole Spanish Armada; wireless telegraphy, aeroplanes and swift destroyers, were at hand for purposes of attack or as a guard against surprise.

On the other hand the Fleets had to face artillery in the skies as well as on the sea; unseen Submarines like giant swordfish threatened the vitals of the ships from the ocean depths below; unknown elements of gun-fire, subterfuges un-

equalled in war annals, bombs filled with poisoned gas and barbarous missiles of every kind threatened the ships and sailors from air and sea and land; beyond all this the honourable conventions and rules of sea-warfare, which had evolved in centuries of British fighting and been accepted by all civilized nations, were swept out of existence by Germany and replaced by unforeseen and cruel yet clever methods of destruction.

The seas, owing to domination by the peace-compelling Navy of our Empire, had so long been kept clear of buccaneers, filibusters, pirates, slave-dealers, and marauders of every description, who, in other ages, had infested the seas and shores of the world, that many had forgotten the beneficent influence and force of British sea-power, and it was not until the great war came and the old-time conditions were renewed for a season, that they began in a dim way to appreciate what the Royal Navy really meant. In Canada, however, so little was heard of its efforts, and of its sleepless watchfulness, of its mighty struggles with the submarine, that it is only now, after the War is over, that people are waking up to the vital value of its services. May they come to realize it in full! Meanwhile the Navy and its rulers did not stand still in construction during the World-War; the record of increased ships and men and guns was absolutely marvelous. Despite the loss of shipping from submarines the British fleet and its auxiliary craft grew from a total of 2,500,000 tons, costing, probably, 2,500 million dollars, to a total of 8,000,000 tons, costing an estimated 10,000 millions of dollars; its personnel, or sailors and operatives, grew from 146,000 to 450,000.

During the progress of the War British construction was steady. Four secret ships were built, of which no details were allowed to become public until the struggle was over but afterwards known to be 800 feet in length, with a displacement of 30,000 tons, a speed of 32 knots an hour and an armament of 15-inch guns. The *Empress of India* and *Benbow* of the *Iron Duke* class (25,000 tons) were built; five battleships of the *Queen Elizabeth* class (27,500 tons) were constructed and five others of 25,750 tons each were completed; four other battleships were purchased. All down the line of warships this progress continued, with also the construction of 4,000,000 tons of merchant shipping during the four and a half years of war.

While the losses of ships from mines or submarines were going on, the North Sea and English Channel, as the centre of existing sea-power, formed the scene of a naval activity almost inconceivable in its vast and ceaseless effort. There were long lanes of swift destroyers, great units of varied nature, fleets of myriad motor-boats and small shipping for

observation or mine-sweeping or mine-laying; a wonderful train-ferry service across the Channel for guns, munitions, and stores; aeroplanes aloft and submarines below. Great merchant ships from all over the world steamed across prescribed lines of passage, transport ships with soldiers passed day and night without the loss of a man, other transports in unceasing stream carried munitions and food and supplies to armies of millions of men—all their war-action turned upon the ability of towering battleships with capacities reaching to 27,000 tons, with crews of over 1,000 men and a driving force of 60,000 horse-power, to hold the seas.

During these months and years the war-mariners of England bore a prolonged burden of disappointment. Nothing would induce the German Navy to risk an engagement such as the Fleets of all previous enemies in history had been compelled to accord the meteor flag of Britain. It would not leave its impregnable land-locked, Heligoland-guarded waterways. Sir David Beatty fought the gallant Battle of the Bight and risked almost certain destruction behind the shore defences of the Germans, and won through, but it was not possible a second time; German raiders and raiding fleets came out upon occasion and were openly encouraged to leave the land in the hope of putting the issue to a test. Finally, on May 31st and June 1st, 1916, an engagement did take place off Jutland on the coast of Denmark. The British Grand Fleet and the German High Seas Fleet met and fought for many hours. The Germans were close to their bases and had left them for objects not clearly defined. Warned of the British movements they may have expected to meet and destroy a part of the British Fleet before the rest could come up—as nearly happened; they may have been escorting cruisers which were to make a dash for the open sea and act as commercial destroyers; they may have intended an imposing raid on the British coast. As it was they lost ships of 119,200 tons at Sir John Jellicoe's current estimate; the British lost 113,300 tons according to the early statement of the Admiralty.

But the German fleet did not break through the cordon, they did not succeed in any of the possible objects mentioned, they did finally cut and run for their bases and British superiority of Naval strength remained, British control of the seas was emphasized, British skill and courage in this new and greater school of naval warfare vindicated. None-the-less the world was told by German news agencies that it was a great German victory and the Kaiser announced that: "The British fleet is beaten and British world-supremacy has disappeared forever." Two days afterwards the Admiralty report appeared but, meanwhile, a portion of the world, perhaps a willing portion, had received an impression of British



defeat which only years could eradicate or the final surrender of the German fleet destroy. Let Admiral Jellicoe's official report speak for the conduct of the Fleet and the character of its officers in this great battle—the Commanders including Admirals Sir Thomas Jerram, A. C. Leveson, A. L. Duff, Sir Doveton Sturdee, E. F. A. Gaunt, Sir Cecil Burney, H. Evan-Thomas, Sir David Beatty:

"The conduct of officers and men throughout the day and night actions was entirely beyond praise. No words of mine could do them justice. On all sides it is reported to me that the glorious traditions of the past were most worthily upheld—whether in heavy ships, cruisers, light cruisers, or destroyers—the same admirable spirit prevailed. Officers and men were cool and determined, with a cheeriness that would have carried them through anything. The heroism of the wounded was the admiration of all. I cannot adequately express the pride with which the spirit of the Fleet filled me.

The magnificent squadron commanded by Rear-Admiral Evan-Thomas formed a support of great value to Sir David Beatty during the afternoon, and was brought into action in rear of the battle fleet in the most judicious manner in the evening. Sir David Beatty once again showed his fine qualities of gallant leadership, firm determination, and correct strategic insight. He appreciated the situation at once on sighting first the enemy's lighter forces, then his battle cruisers and finally his battle fleet. I can fully sympathize with his feelings when the evening mist and fading light robbed the Fleet of that complete victory for which he had manoeuvred and for which the vessels in company with him had striven so hard. The services rendered by him, not only on this, but on two previous occasions, have been of the very greatest value."

Minor German raids on the British coast followed, but this was the last appearance of the German High Seas Fleet as a fighting factor in the War. There was also the desperate British effort to close up Zeebrugge and Ostend as submarine bases and the extraordinary success of Capt. A. F. B. Carpenter, V.C., in *H.M.S. Vindictive* at the former place. Battles were not the chief mission, however, of the British Navy in this War. Apart from its vital blockade business, its guardianship of world commerce and protection of transports, munitions and supplies for great nations and armies, the Navy had subordinate services of incalculable importance. Its splendidly self-sacrificing, and publicly unknown, force of thousands of mine-sweepers and patrols in the North Sea steamed, in one nine month's period, 1,132,000 miles and in 1916 and 1917 alone, swept up 64,000 mines; the Admiralty's salvage Department succeeded in bringing up from the depths 500 ships torpedoed by submarines or mines; its dockyards repaired 31,470 British ships up to May 1918 and large numbers belonging to the Allies.

A subsidiary land-work of construction and repair employed 2,000,000 workers who built warships and mercantile vessels without stint of time or strength or labour. The Navy had auxiliary craft of tiny size but great value manned by 50,000 volunteers which aided in every kind of coast work, life saving at sea, submarine detection, general watchfulness and frequent fighting with the under-sea foe; it made Sea Scouts of British boys who, in thousands, took up similar lines of work and did gallant service in paths of varied adventure and useful effort. Its Royal Naval Air Service performed a work of the same silent, valuable character as that of the Navy itself—dropping bombs on Ostend and Zeebruggé, following and fighting German raiders or submarines, helping Italian efforts, dropping bombs on the Turks at Gaza or at Constantinople, “spotting” the enemy on sea and coast. The Navy as a whole prevented 2,000,000 enemy subjects of military age from crossing the seas to join the forces of Germany or its Allies. Let the words of King George V., in addressing his victorious Parliament and people and Empire on Nov. 19th, 1919, in words representing his Ministers and the nation, conclude this brief record:—

After a struggle longer and far more terrible than anyone could have foretold the soil of Great Britain remains inviolate. Our Navy has everywhere held the seas, and wherever the enemy could be brought to battle, it has renewed the glories of Drake and Nelson. The incessant work it has accomplished in overcoming the hidden menace of the enemy's submarines and in guarding the ships that have brought food and munitions to our shore has been less conspicuous but equally essential to success.

Without that work Britain might have starved and those gallant soldiers of America who have so much contributed to our victory could not have found their way hither. The Fleet has enabled us to win the War. In fact, without the Fleet, the struggle could not have been maintained, for upon the command of the sea, the very existence and maintenance of our land forces have from the first depended.

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*President of League:*  
**Amillius Jarvis, S.S.D.**  
103 Bay St., Toronto.

*Chairman of Committee:*  
**J. Castell Hopkins, F.S.S., F.R.G.S.**  
2 College St., Toronto.

